



City of Portland, Oregon
Bureau of Development Services
Land Use Services
FROM CONCEPT TO CONSTRUCTION

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Briefing

DISCUSSION MEMO

Date: June 17, 2021
To: Historic Landmarks Commission & Design Commission
From: Hillary Adam, Design / Historic Review Team
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Re: Belgian Blocks
Briefing Memo – June 28, 2021

On March 22, 2021, representatives of the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS) informed the Commission that Peter Meijer Architects (PMA) had been contracted by the City to perform a study and produce a report with recommendations regarding the City's inventory of Belgian Blocks. Historically, Belgian blocks, made of basalt, were used to pave the City's roads but have been paved over with asphalt. Occasionally, some of these blocks are discovered when adjacent new development results in work within the right-of-way. These blocks are then returned to the City which stores them until they can be redeployed in another location. The existing regulations on deployment of the blocks were adopted in 1975, prior to the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act which dictates that floor and ground surfaces must be stable, firm, and slip resistant, as well as smooth, thus discouraging the use of cobbles as a paving material.

The PMA study resulted in the following conclusions:

1. The historic ordinances need to be updated to reflect more deployment options;
2. Design details for deployment are in need of updating and reflect various methodologies;
3. Belgian Blocks can be redeployed as linear elements within the Public Right of Way meeting ADA requirements;
4. Best use of the Blocks within the Right of Way are as vehicular surface material, between rail lines, in plazas combined with smoother pathways;
5. Modification of surface tension and texture are acceptable methods meeting historic standards.

The report itself documents potential issues with the use of Belgian blocks in the right-of-way, ways to address some of those issues, and case studies of similar paver deployment in North America.

Please contact me with any questions or concerns.